

Autism and Dentists

Visiting the dentist can come with a number of challenges for autistic people. Autistics commonly experience sensory sensitivities, miscommunications or misunderstandings, which are frustrating at the best of times. These are particularly difficult when the person you're interacting with is also the person you need help from when you're vulnerable, unwell or in pain. This resource aims to look at some of the challenges and how they might be minimised.

The below topics are not going to be relevant to every age group but may provide an understanding of why visiting the dentist can be difficult.



Sensory differences

Sensory differences or sensitivities are often not well understood, and this means that people often think they're overreacting or being dramatic, which, in turn, results in invalidation.

The sound of electricity can be painful. Brushing your teeth can be painful. Minor injuries or illnesses can feel intolerable and distressing. Even if one person's experience does not line up with the majority, that does not mean it's not possible or that the person is lying.

Sensory difficulties can be particularly challenging at the dentist. It involves a number of noises, tastes, uncomfortable sensations, bright lights, and being touched.

Below are some things you might consider to make the experience slightly easier:

- Use plain water instead of mouthwash
- Avoid having the autistic patient come in while another patient is receiving a filling or other noisy procedure.
- Determine the most important actions and shorten the appointment as much as possible.
- Allow the individual to use headphones
- Look at offering OPG x-rays rather than bite wing x-rays. They are less uncomfortable for some people.
- Let the patient decide whether they want fluoride put on their teeth at the end of the appointment or not. These often leave an awful taste and you are told not to eat or drink for half an hour afterwards. This would mean requiring them to deal with something they may find intolerable and distressing.
- Provide encouragement and avoid scare tactics. Autistic people can struggle to care for their teeth and may frequently present with issues. Using scare tactics to get them to better look after their teeth may only make dental appointments more challenging. Understanding that by being at the appointment, they are making an effort, and encouraging them for what they are achieving, can make the appointment a more positive experience.
- Don't force the appointment. In the process of developing trust and reassurance, prepare to listen to the client's distress and allow them to end the appointment short (where safe and possible). Over time this can help the autistic client to trust that you don't want to hurt or upset them and that they can opt out when they aren't coping.
- If the autistic client needs a procedure done, such as a filling, and you are unable to provide anaesthetic, provide recommendations for another practitioner who can offer local anaesthetic.
- Where possible, having alternative places to wait can be helpful, for example, in a separate room, in the car or outside.



Expression and experience of emotion, pain, and discomfort

The way autistic people express and experience emotion and pain can differ from that of non-autistic individuals. Autistic people may not express emotion or pain in the way you expect them to. They could look completely fine, be laughing and having a conversation, and be distressed or in severe pain at the same time. If an autistic person is telling you they are not okay or that they are in pain, listen to them - don't judge the accuracy of their statements on how composed they look.

Similarly, they might experience pain more intensely than others as a result of sensory differences. But that doesn't make the pain any less real and it should not be brushed off or ignored. Especially considering that being too quick to put it down to sensory issues could just make the individual feel as though they are not being taken seriously.



Communication differences

Autistic individuals may communicate quite literally, may struggle with broad questions, may need to communicate via different means (e.g. AAC or writing) or may have a hard time communicating at all.

It's also not particularly uncommon for issues to arise when the autistic person attempts to communicate via any means other than speaking. They might write things down, type, or use a digital device but people often do not understand why the person cannot just have a 'normal' conversation since they are there in person. This is particularly the case when they know that the person can usually or sometimes communicate via spoken conversation. It's not uncommon to hear "Why don't you come back when you're ready to talk", "Why are you here if you're not going to talk to me?", or "I can't help you if you don't tell me what's going on." This can leave the autistic person feeling misunderstood, frustrated, and like there's just no way for them to access the help that they need.



Alexithymia and interoception

Some autistic people have a hard time identifying and describing how they're feeling emotionally as well as how they're feeling physically. This can sometimes be misinterpreted by others to mean that there's nothing going on or that the person is okay.



Terminology

Language and the way you speak about autism is very important. Staying up-to-date with current language preferences will help you to avoid saying something that could cause the individual to feel unsafe being open about their autism. It's important to respect individual preferences but as a general rule, and as a starting point, avoid the following phrases and words:

- 'Person with autism' or 'suffers from autism' - Most autistic individuals prefer 'autistic' over 'person with autism'. 'Person with autism' implies that being autistic is negative or that it is something separate from the individual, which is contradictory to the way many autistic people feel.
- 'Everyone is a little autistic' or 'Everyone is on the spectrum' - These phrases are often very invalidating and are frequently used in a way that comes across as an attempt to minimise the autistic person's struggles or make it seem like they are overreacting. These phrases are also not correct and saying them will likely let the person know that you do not have a good understanding of autism and that they need to proceed with caution. The autism spectrum is not linear, this means that it isn't a matter of being 'more' or 'less' autistic. But autistic traits are human traits, so just because an autistic person experiences it does not mean that no one else can experience it.
- 'High-functioning' or 'low-functioning' - Functioning labels are not an accurate reflection of individual support needs and are only reflective of the comfort levels of, and convenience for, those who interact with the autistic person. They are often brought up in a way that minimises or invalidates struggles that the autistic person is facing.



Making an appointment

The task of making an appointment is something that can cause a lot of anxiety for many people, not just autistics. For autistic people, it may be that they struggle with phone calls, or they don't know what to say to ask for an appointment.



Uncertainty, changes, and unmet expectations

The fact of the matter is that appointments often run late. That's the way it is, there's not a lot that can be done about that. However, it's important to understand and acknowledge that this can be particularly stressful for autistic people and can result in meltdowns or shutdowns. Uncertainty, changes, and unmet expectations can make it harder for autistics to communicate, process questions or manage stimulation.

It can be helpful to reduce or avoid this where possible. If an earlier appointment is less likely to run late, book an earlier appointment. Be careful about telling an autistic person that you're going to do something, don't offer something that you can't or might not follow through on.